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SUBJECT: NORTHEASTERN SYRIA: IT'S MORE THAN JUST UNHAPPY KURDS

REF: STATE 21427

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On a tour of the Jazirah region of northern and eastern Syria, PD officers witnessed first-hand the cultural complexity of Syrian society, the effect of population and environmental shifts on this mosaic, and the extensive reach of the Syrian security services. From March 10-13, PAO and CAO visited a range of non-Kurdish contacts in Deir al-Zur, Al-Hasaka, and Al-Qamishli, including the editor of the area's only newspaper, a Christian human rights activist, a Syrian-American tribal leader, and the Armenian and Syriac communities in Al-Qamishli. Welcoming Arabic-speaking American diplomats into their homes and communities, all our interlocutors evinced a desire for better U.S.-Syrian relations and closer cultural and economic cooperation between Syrians and Americans. They were also unanimous in their dislike of the Kurdish population, whom they consider troublesome interlopers.
END SUMMARY.

NEGLECT IN DEIR AL-ZUR

¶2. (SBU) In Deir al-Zur, PDOffs were told that until fairly recently, the city had been neglected by the central government, principally because of its inhabitants' leanings towards Iraq. Residents still remember vividly last year's visit by President Bashar al-Asad, the first such visit by a Syrian president since independence. PDOffs called on the editor of the only government-supported daily newspaper in the Jazirah, "al-Furat," founded by the government four years ago (circulation 5400). Although the editor, a political author, regaled PDOffs with a two-hour tirade of history, myth, and rhetoric, he also declared that "Syrians have nothing against Americans" and called the election of an African-American president a historical milestone which gave Syrians hope for better relations with the United States.

¶3. (SBU) The establishment of the newspaper and a new public university, both four years ago, as well as the addition of a private university in 2008 and the recent appointment of a new governor to replace his corrupt predecessor, are indications that the regime in Damascus is paying more attention to this long-neglected city. [NOTE: We heard that the new governor, Hussein Arnous, is reported to have been questioned by the UN International Independent Investigation Committee. END NOTE] The attention is sorely needed in a city hard hit by economic woes; the unemployment rate was reported to PDOffs as 50 percent.

FOR YOUR PROTECTION

¶4. (SBU) While the security services surveilled PD officers throughout the trip, the choice of date contributed to the unusually heavy security escort PDOffs received in Al-Qamishli. Upon arrival,

the security chief demanded to see a permit to travel more than 40 kilometers outside Damascus. Up to three cars and two motorbikes accompanied PDOffs throughout the day, and security officials sat in on some meetings, taking copious notes. The SARG escort made any interaction with the Kurdish community impossible. The Christian community, however, did not trigger the same level of scrutiny or efforts to keep us out. The relationship between PDOffs' Christian hosts and the security detail was respectful; one host, a young woman doctor, invited them into her home for lunch. [NOTE: Rather uncharacteristically, security officers appeared to enjoy the trip to the point of asking curious questions about the Armenian/Syriac culture of our hosts and thanking the Embassy driver for an enjoyable visit. END NOTE.] PDOffs' hosts assured them that the heavy security was purely for their protection; when the day proved quiet (with no clashes), they said approvingly: "Yes, the state is keeping control."

KUMBAYA -- BUT NOT FOR EVERYONE

15. (SBU) The Al-Jazirah region, especially the city of Al-Qamishli, usually attracts attention because of Kurdish claims of government persecution and episodic reports of SARG crackdowns on the Kurdish population. To avoid provoking SARG sensitivities, PDOffs avoided Kurdish contacts and focused on a very different side of the city. The Christian community in Al-Qamishli reportedly comprises 15-20 percent of the city and includes Catholic and Orthodox Syriac Christians, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Protestants, many highly educated and prosperous. Relations among the multiple Christian sects appeared harmonious. At one crossroads near the center of town, large Armenian, Syriac, and Chaldean churches occupy three of the four corners. On the fourth, a new Armenian church was under construction.

16. (SBU) Relations between Christian communities and the majority Kurdish population and other ethnic groups appeared, however, to be contentious. We heard comments about "the Kurds" throughout our trip and unfortunately were able to get only one side of the story. PDOffs met a Syriac Christian who is trying to preserve Syriac traditional culture; he directs an accomplished youth dance troupe and has received awards for his efforts to support the preservation of Syriac culture. His work is supported by the Ministry of Culture; a senior official there told PAO privately that "we have to do something to counter the influence of the Kurds."

17. (SBU) In Al-Hasaka, a local Sunni tribal leader, businessman, and Amcit, took great pains to organize a lunch reflecting his vision of diversity and tolerance: Muslims, Christians, and Armenians, but no Kurds or other groups. At a private meeting later, a local Syriac Christian gave voice to tensions beneath the surface. He explained the city dwellers' distrust of Muslim bedouins, as well as their concerns that higher Muslim birthrates would continue to erode the position of Christians in the region. Both he and the tribal leader expressed negative attitudes toward Shi'a Muslims, including Alawites, and Iran. The tribal leader cited a higher percentage of babies named Umar as proof of popular antipathy toward the Shi'a. NOTE: Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Muslim caliph, is considered by Sunni Muslims as the heir to the Prophet Mohammad. Shi'a Muslims, however, consider him a usurper and support Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law. END NOTE.

18. (SBU) PDOffs' hosts said that fifty years ago the Jazirah had been 80-90 percent Christian, but that due to Christian emigration, immigration by Kurds and others, and the high Muslim birthrates, the Kurds now dominate and Christians form only 35 percent of the population. (Note: There are no official SARG figures on which to assess these claims. End note.) Near Al-Qamishli, villages with Syriac shrines that had once been mixed Christian and Muslim are now all Muslim; the Christian families, PDOffs were told, had all left Syria. "Every family has at least one member abroad," said one doctor; "they are in Sweden, which hosts the largest population of Syriac Christians, Austria, Germany, and elsewhere." The doctor is a partner in a new hotel-which largely depends on an influx of expatriate Christians returning to Al-Qamishli in the summer. While not explicitly stated, the reasons for Christian emigration are likely to reflect regional trends: economic pressure and perceived or real threats from an increasing Muslim population.

"AL-JAZIRAH IS NOT KURDISTAN"

¶9. (SBU) The tolerance and respect PDOffs witnessed both between Muslims and Christians in Al-Hasaka and among Christian sects in Al-Qamishli did not extend to the Kurdish community. Our visit coincided with the fourth anniversary of the 2005 Kurdish uprising in Al-Qamishli. The memory of those events was still fresh for the Christian community, who told PDOffs the Kurds had inflicted damages of over 100 million Syrian pounds (\$2 million USD) to public property, including hospitals and public amenities. [NOTE: No one mentioned the fact that Syrian security forces opened fire on crowds of unarmed Kurds fleeing a soccer stadium riot provoked by anti-Kurdish chants. END NOTE.]

¶10. (SBU) There was no sympathy expressed for the situation of the Kurds; rather, our interlocutors - both Christian and Muslim -- described the Kurds as having taken advantage of Syria's generosity. "They came during the last 50 years;" a doctor in Al-Qamishli said. "They knew nothing and had no skills; we taught them our handicrafts and artisanal skills; the government gave them education, housing, and health care. Now they are very rich and hold the majority (sic) of government positions. They have all their rights. We do not understand what they want or why they cause trouble." She told PDOffs that of the 850 positions in the hospital where she works, 600 are held by Kurds.

¶11. (SBU) Notably, none of our interlocutors mentioned any efforts to improve relations with the Kurdish community. To the contrary, there was a heavy sense of resentment against Kurdish sentiments in favor of autonomy and even an independent country. In Al-Hasaka, a Syriac Christian human rights activist told PDOffs that while he respects some of the Kurdish organizations, "Al-Jazirah is not Kurdistan," and the non-Kurdish population would never support a breakaway from Syria -- which is what he claimed was the ultimate goal of the Kurdish community as a whole.

LITTLE WATER, FLOOD OF EMIGRATION

¶12. (SBU) Once called the "California of Syria," and known as Syria's breadbasket because of its huge agricultural output, the Jazirah region has been badly affected by the drought of the last few years and by longer-term climate changes. The highway from Deir al-Zur to Al-Hasaka passed through miles of untilled parched land and desolate villages, the inhabitants of which have departed for Damascus and other cities. "We call them ghost cities," said the wife of a tribal leader in Al-Hasaka; "without water, they cannot farm or make a living, so they leave." PDOffs heard that 15 years ago these barren lands had all been farms. Emigration or migration due to drought is compounded by a steady rate of emigration to Lebanon, Europe, and North America by the Christian community.

¶13. (SBU) Al-Qamishli and its surrounding villages seemed far more prosperous and developed than either Deir al-Zur or Hassake. When asked about the evident prosperity of the city, PDOffs' hosts said there had been adequate rainfall this winter in the surrounding area and to the northeast, making for a successful season for the farmers. They also cited the presence of oil companies in the area. Others noted the importance of remittances from Christian relatives living abroad.

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT: Reftel encourages Post to reach out and listen to local audiences. PDOffs did just that, in Arabic and with an audience often outside the usual scope of Embassy contacts. PDOffs heard calls for genuine support for increased cooperation, including more exchange opportunities for students, joint cultural programming, and English teaching and teacher training. IIP publications, including the biography of President Obama in Arabic, were accepted with alacrity. PDOffs utilized the visit to advertise Post's website, its Facebook page, and online alumni resources. One constraint on Post's follow-up to the visit and further cooperation with Syrian audiences is the ubiquitous interference of the security services and their intense paranoia about Syrian citizens'

engagement with foreigners, especially Americans. END COMMENT.

CONNELLY